Clinical Reviews & Cases

The Sacred Epistemology of Not-Knowing: Uncertainty and Doubt as Foundations for Humility in Medicine and Religion

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Citation: Julian Y Ungar-Sargon. The Sacred Epistemology of Not-Knowing: Uncertainty and Doubt as Foundations for Humility in Medicine and Religion. Clin Rev Cases. 2026; 8(1): 1-8.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the fundamental role of uncertainty and doubt in both medical practice and religious inquiry, arguing that epistemic humility constitutes not a deficiency but a defining virtue of mature engagement with both disciplines. Drawing upon phenomenological philosophy, Talmudic hermeneutics, apophatic theology, and contemporary philosophy of medicine, we demonstrate that the recognition of irreducible uncertainty creates sacred space at the boundaries of knowledge—space essential for genuine healing and authentic theological encounter. The parallel structures of clinical reasoning and theological inquiry reveal that both domains require practitioners who can dwell productively in ambiguity, resist premature closure, and honor the mystery that remains after all our best efforts at understanding. We propose that cultivating comfort with uncertainty represents the highest form of professional and spiritual development in both medicine and religion.

Keywords

Epistemic humility, Uncertainty in medicine, Medical epistemology, Theology and medicine, Philosophy of medicine, Clinical uncertainty.

Introduction: The Paradox of Learned Ignorance

The fifteenth-century cardinal and philosopher Nicholas of Cusa introduced the concept of *docta ignorantia*—learned ignorance—arguing that the highest form of wisdom consists in recognizing the limits of human knowledge [1]. This insight, though articulated within a Christian mystical framework, resonates across religious traditions and finds unexpected echoes in contemporary philosophy of medicine. Both the clinician at the bedside and the theologian before the sacred text confront the same fundamental challenge: how to act wisely and compassionately in the face of irreducible uncertainty, how to make consequential decisions when complete knowledge remains forever beyond reach.

The modern period has witnessed an unprecedented expansion of technical knowledge in both domains. Medical science has mapped the human genome, developed sophisticated imaging technologies, and created targeted molecular therapies that would have seemed miraculous to previous generations. Religious scholarship has produced critical editions of sacred texts, archaeological discoveries illuminating ancient contexts, and nuanced historical analyses of tradition development. Yet paradoxically, this explosion of knowledge has not diminished uncertainty; if anything, it has revealed new dimensions of our ignorance. Each answered question opens onto further mysteries, each solved problem discloses deeper complexities.

This article argues that uncertainty and doubt, rather than representing failures of method or deficiencies of faith, constitute essential features of authentic engagement with both medicine and religion. The physician who admits uncertainty is not demonstrating weakness but practicing intellectual honesty; the theologian who embraces doubt is not abandoning faith but deepening it. Both disciplines, properly understood, require practitioners capable of dwelling productively in what the poet John Keats called 'negative capability'—the capacity to remain 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' [2].

The Epistemic Situation of Medicine

Medicine operates under conditions of radical uncertainty that practitioners often minimize or deny. The philosopher of medicine Kathryn Montgomery has argued persuasively that medicine is not, despite common assumption, an applied science but rather a practice that uses scientific knowledge in situations of irreducible particularity [3]. The individual patient before the clinician is not a generic instance of a disease category but a unique embodied subject whose response to illness and treatment cannot be fully predicted from population-level data.

This uncertainty manifests at multiple levels. At the diagnostic level, physicians work with symptoms and signs that are often ambiguous, tests that have false positive and false negative rates, and disease categories that shade imperceptibly into one another. The philosopher Ian Hacking has demonstrated how diagnostic categories are simultaneously discovered and constructed—they track real patterns in nature while also being shaped by social, economic, and professional interests [4]. At the therapeutic level, evidence-based medicine provides guidance for populations but cannot determine optimal treatment for individuals. The randomized controlled trial, medicine's gold standard for establishing efficacy, deliberately excludes the contextual factors that most influence outcomes in actual practice.

The phenomenologist Drew Leder has explored how the lived body resists full objectification by medical science [5]. The patient's experience of illness—what Eric Cassell calls 'the suffering person'—exceeds any account that can be given in biomedical terms [6]. Pain, fatigue, anxiety, and hope are not epiphenomena to be dismissed but essential dimensions of the clinical situation that cannot be captured by laboratory values or imaging studies. The physician who ignores these dimensions in favor of purely technical considerations has not achieved scientific rigor but has instead truncated the reality being addressed.

Contemporary neuroscience has further complicated medical certainty by revealing how much of our assessment of patients depends on rapid, intuitive pattern recognition rather than explicit algorithmic reasoning. The dual-process theory of cognition, developed by Daniel Kahneman and others, distinguishes between fast, automatic 'System 1' thinking and slow, deliberative 'System 2' thinking [7]. Expert clinical judgment relies heavily on System 1 processes that operate below conscious awareness—what Howard Brody has called 'the art of medicine'—and these processes, while often remarkably accurate, are also subject to systematic biases that resist correction [8].

The Illusion of Diagnostic Certainty

The autopsy studies of the mid-twentieth century revealed a sobering truth that medicine has struggled to assimilate: clinical diagnoses are wrong far more often than physicians believe. Classic studies found discrepancy rates between clinical and autopsy diagnoses ranging from 10 to 40 percent, with major unexpected findings in a significant proportion of cases [9]. While autopsy rates have declined dramatically—itself perhaps a symptom of medicine's discomfort with confronting its errors—there is no evidence that diagnostic accuracy has improved sufficiently to account for this change.

The psychiatrist Jerome Groopman has documented how cognitive errors pervade clinical reasoning, leading physicians to premature closure on incorrect diagnoses [10]. Anchoring bias causes clinicians to fixate on initial impressions despite contradictory evidence. Availability bias leads to overdiagnosis of conditions recently encountered or dramatically memorable. Confirmation bias drives selective attention to data supporting the working hypothesis while dismissing inconsistent findings. Attribution errors cause physicians to assume that patients' symptoms reflect psychological rather than organic causes, particularly when patients are perceived as difficult or when symptoms do not fit familiar patterns.

These findings do not impugn medical competence so much as reveal the inherent limitations of human cognition when applied to complex, ambiguous situations. The appropriate response is not defensive denial but epistemic humility—what the physician-philosopher William Osler called 'the grace of humility' that he considered the physician's cardinal virtue [11]. Osler understood that medicine's most dangerous practitioner is not the ignorant one, who at least knows the limits of personal knowledge, but the overconfident one, who mistakes partial understanding for comprehensive mastery.

Theological Epistemology and the Via Negativa

Religious traditions have generally been more hospitable to uncertainty than modern medicine, though this hospitality is often forgotten in contemporary debates that pit religion against science as competing systems of certainty. The apophatic or negative theological tradition, represented in Christianity by figures from Pseudo-Dionysius to Meister Eckhart to the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, insists that God transcends all human concepts and categories [12]. Any affirmative statement about the divine must be immediately qualified by recognition of its inadequacy. God is not merely unknown but unknowable in principle, not because of human cognitive limitations that might eventually be overcome but because infinite being exceeds finite comprehension by definition.

The Jewish mystical tradition develops this insight through the Kabbalistic concept of *Ein Sof*—literally 'without end' or 'the infinite'—which designates the divine as absolutely transcendent and beyond all characterization [13]. The *Zohar* and subsequent Kabbalistic literature distinguish between *Ein Sof* itself, which remains forever hidden, and the *sefirot*, the divine attributes or emanations through which God becomes accessible to human knowledge and relationship. Even the *sefirot*, however, are not God's essence but rather the modes through which divine energy flows into creation—garments, as it were, rather than the body they clothe.

Moses Maimonides, the twelfth-century physician-philosopher

whose influence spans Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought, developed a rigorous negative theology that has profound implications for our inquiry. In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides argues that human beings can know *what God does* but not *what God is* [14]. Divine attributes must be understood as either negations of imperfection or descriptions of divine actions, not positive characterizations of divine essence. When we say 'God is wise,' we properly mean only that God is not ignorant; we cannot grasp what divine wisdom might be in itself.

This Maimonidean epistemology has significant implications for religious humility. If we cannot know what God is, then all theological systems must be provisional, all religious certainties qualified. The dogmatist who claims definitive knowledge of divine nature and will has transgressed the limits of human cognition, confusing partial glimpses for comprehensive vision. Authentic religious knowledge, paradoxically, increases awareness of how much remains unknown.

Talmudic Mahloket and the Sanctification of Disagreement

The rabbinic tradition offers a distinctive model for engaging uncertainty through its embrace of *mahloket*—sustained, unresolved disagreement—as a positive religious value. Unlike philosophical or scientific traditions that view disagreement as a problem to be overcome through better reasoning or additional evidence, the Talmud preserves minority opinions, records debates without resolution, and treats the process of argumentation as itself sacred [15]. The famous dictum that 'both these and those are the words of the living God' (*elu v'elu divrei elohim hayyim*) elevates disagreement from epistemic failure to theological principle [16].

The Talmudic sages understood that legal and theological questions often admit multiple valid answers, each capturing some dimension of truth while necessarily excluding others. The unresolved debates that fill the Talmud's pages are not evidence of ancient failures of reasoning but deliberate preservation of interpretive plurality. As the twentieth-century philosopher Emmanuel Levinas observed in his Talmudic readings, the rabbinic text is structured to prevent closure, to keep questions open, to ensure that each generation must engage the tradition anew rather than simply receiving predetermined answers [17].

This model has profound implications for how we understand religious authority and certainty. The rabbi is not one who possesses final truth but one skilled in navigating uncertainty, in weighing considerations, in recognizing the strengths of opposing positions. The concept of *da'at Torah*—the special insight attributed to great sages—does not promise infallibility but rather depth of engagement with a tradition that resists definitive resolution. The humble sage, aware of how much remains uncertain, is more trustworthy than the confident pronouncer of verdicts.

Convergent Structures of Medical and Religious Inquiry

The parallel structures of medical and religious epistemology become visible when we examine how practitioners in both domains actually reason. Neither the physician at the bedside nor the theologian before the text operates through straightforward application of rules to cases. Both engage in what Aristotle called *phronesis*—practical wisdom—the capacity to perceive salient features of particular situations and respond appropriately when general principles underdetermine specific actions [18].

The clinician confronting a complex patient does not simply match symptoms to diagnostic algorithms but rather engages in a sophisticated interpretive process that draws on scientific knowledge, clinical experience, intuitive pattern recognition, and empathic attunement to the patient's lived experience. Similarly, the theologian or religious leader responding to existential questions does not merely retrieve pre-formed answers but engages in hermeneutical work that relates traditional resources to contemporary situations in ways that cannot be fully specified in advance.

Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics illuminates this convergence. Gadamer argues that all interpretation involves a 'fusion of horizons' between the interpreter's present situation and the historical tradition being interpreted [19]. Neither medicine nor religion can be practiced through mere technical application of rules because the situations requiring response are always partially novel, always exceeding the categories developed to comprehend previous cases. The good practitioner in either domain must be able to perceive what is genuinely new in each situation while remaining connected to the wisdom accumulated through tradition.

Both medicine and religion also share what we might call a 'fiduciary structure'—they operate through trust relationships that precede and exceed what can be contractually specified or scientifically verified. The patient must trust the physician before treatment can begin; the religious seeker must trust the tradition before its wisdom can be received. This trust is not blind faith but what Paul Ricoeur called a 'second naiveté'—trust that has passed through critical questioning and emerged transformed but not destroyed [20]. The practitioner who has never doubted has not yet developed the mature faith or clinical judgment that can be trusted in crisis.

The Phenomenology of Clinical and Sacred Encounter

At the deepest level, both medicine and religion involve encounters with mystery that exceed human comprehension. The physician confronting the dying patient faces mysteries of mortality, suffering, and the limits of healing that no amount of technical knowledge can resolve. The theologian confronting divine absence in human suffering faces the same mysteries from a different angle. In both cases, the practitioner who pretends to possess answers that do not exist offers false comfort at best and harmful distortion at worst.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber distinguished between 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' modes of relationship, arguing that authentic encounter requires suspending the objectifying gaze that treats the other as a thing to be analyzed and manipulated [21]. This distinction applies directly to both clinical and religious practice. The physician who reduces the patient to a disease mechanism has lost the patient as

person; the theologian who reduces God to a doctrinal formula has lost the living God who exceeds all formulations. Both errors stem from the same source: an attempt to eliminate uncertainty by replacing encounter with control.

Emmanuel Levinas extends Buber's insight by arguing that the face of the other places an infinite ethical demand that cannot be satisfied by any finite response [22]. The suffering patient makes a claim on the physician that exceeds any possible treatment; the neighbor in need makes a claim on the religious person that exceeds any possible charity. This infinite demand generates appropriate humility because the practitioner recognizes that all responses fall short, that more could always be done, that complete adequacy remains forever beyond reach.

The Kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*—divine contraction—offers a powerful metaphor for the kind of space that must be created for genuine encounter [23]. According to Isaac Luria's influential formulation, God contracted the divine infinity to create space for the finite world to exist. Similarly, the physician must contract professional ego and certainty to create space for the patient's experience to emerge; the religious teacher must contract personal convictions to create space for the seeker's questions to be honored. This self-contraction is not weakness but strength, not absence but a particular mode of presence that makes relationship possible.

The Dangers of False Certainty

If uncertainty is intrinsic to both medical and religious practice, then the refusal to acknowledge uncertainty becomes not merely an intellectual error but a moral failing. The physician who presents uncertain diagnoses as definitive conclusions violates the patient's autonomy by denying access to information necessary for informed decision-making. The religious leader who presents contingent interpretations as divine commands violates the seeker's autonomy by foreclosing legitimate alternatives.

The history of medicine offers abundant examples of harm caused by false certainty. Nineteenth-century physicians confidently prescribed mercury and bloodletting based on humoral theories now recognized as fundamentally mistaken. Twentieth-century psychiatrists confidently diagnosed and institutionalized patients based on categories now recognized as culturally constructed. In each era, the most dangerous practitioners were not those who admitted uncertainty but those who projected unwarranted confidence that prevented self-correction.

Religious history offers parallel examples. Inquisitions, crusades, and religious wars were prosecuted by those absolutely certain of divine will. Witch trials were conducted by those absolutely certain of demonic activity. Schisms and excommunications were declared by those absolutely certain of doctrinal correctness. The common thread is not religion itself but the false certainty that transforms partial human understanding into unconditional divine mandate.

The sociologist of religion Peter Berger has argued that the modern situation of religious pluralism makes absolute certainty increasingly difficult to sustain [24]. When one encounters sincere practitioners of other traditions who hold incompatible beliefs with equal conviction, the epistemic grounds for certainty erode. This erosion need not lead to relativism—the view that all positions are equally valid—but can instead foster a chastened conviction that takes its own perspective seriously while acknowledging legitimate alternatives.

Cultivating Productive Uncertainty

If uncertainty is both inevitable and valuable, then medical and religious education must actively cultivate the capacity to dwell productively in ambiguity. This requires counteracting powerful psychological tendencies toward closure and certainty. Cognitive psychology has documented the 'closure need'—the discomfort with ambiguity that motivates premature resolution—and shown how this need intensifies under conditions of stress, time pressure, and accountability [25]. Both clinical and religious practice regularly involve such conditions, making the temptation to false certainty particularly strong precisely when its dangers are greatest.

Medical education has begun to address this challenge through curricula that emphasize diagnostic uncertainty and shared decision-making. The physician-educator Jay Katz pioneered attention to 'the silent world of doctor and patient,' arguing that physicians must learn to disclose uncertainty rather than projecting false confidence [26]. More recent initiatives in medical humanities expose students to narrative, philosophy, and the arts—disciplines that cultivate comfort with ambiguity and multiple perspectives.

Religious education might similarly benefit from explicit attention to epistemic humility. Rather than presenting tradition as a closed system of answers, religious educators might emphasize the living questions that motivate ongoing inquiry. Rather than minimizing internal diversity and historical change, they might present these as evidence of vitality rather than deficiency. The goal is not to undermine faith but to mature it—to develop practitioners who can hold convictions firmly while remaining open to correction and growth.

The contemplative practices found in many religious traditions offer resources for developing tolerance of uncertainty. Meditation and prayer, when practiced with integrity, involve sitting with not-knowing, allowing questions to remain open, resisting the compulsive need for answers. The 'cloud of unknowing' described by the anonymous medieval mystic is not an obstacle to be overcome but a medium through which deeper truth becomes accessible [27]. Similar practices might be adapted for medical education—not as religious content but as cognitive training in sustaining attention amid uncertainty.

Doubt as Faithful Practice

The argument thus far might seem to recommend doubt as a merely pragmatic strategy—useful for avoiding errors and fostering humility. But a deeper point remains to be made: doubt can be understood as itself a mode of faithful engagement, not merely an

obstacle to faith or a concession to human limitation.

The theologian Paul Tillich distinguished between doubt that leads away from faith and doubt that is an element within faith [28]. The latter, which Tillich called 'existential doubt,' arises from genuine engagement with ultimate questions and represents spiritual seriousness rather than spiritual failure. The person who has never doubted has never really believed, because belief that has not been tested remains shallow and unreliable. Mature faith has passed through doubt and emerged transformed—not returned to naive certainty but established on a deeper foundation.

The Hebrew Bible models this faithful doubt in figures like Abraham, who argues with God over the fate of Sodom; Moses, who repeatedly questions divine commands; Job, who refuses to accept easy theodicies; and the Psalmist, who cries out in anguish at divine absence. These are not failures of faith but its deepest expressions—the willingness to bring one's full humanity, including confusion and protest, into relationship with the sacred. A God who cannot bear honest questioning is not the God of Israel.

Medical practice might similarly recognize doubt as faithful engagement rather than mere hesitation. The physician who pauses before diagnosis, who considers alternative possibilities, who acknowledges uncertainty to the patient, is not practicing inferior medicine but superior medicine. This doubt reflects not lack of knowledge but genuine respect for the complexity being addressed. The body and psyche of the patient exceed any schema developed to comprehend them; doubt honors this excess.

The Space at the Edge of Knowledge
We come finally to the space at the edge of knowledge—the zone where certainty fades, where established categories become insufficient, where practitioners in both medicine and religion must rely on resources beyond technical competence. This space is not empty but full; not merely a limit but an opening. It is the space where genuine encounter becomes possible, where transformation can occur, where healing in its deepest sense takes place.

The philosopher Gabriel Marcel distinguished between problems and mysteries [29]. Problems are external difficulties that can be solved through technical means; mysteries are situations in which the inquirer is personally involved and which cannot be resolved by stepping outside. Both medicine and religion, at their deepest levels, engage mysteries rather than problems. The suffering of illness, the approach of death, the search for meaning, the encounter with the sacred—these cannot be 'solved' but only lived through with whatever wisdom and grace we can muster.

At the edge of knowledge, the practitioner must rely on presence rather than prescription. The physician who has exhausted treatment options can still sit with the dying patient; this sitting is not failure but a different kind of medicine. The theologian who cannot answer the survivor's question about where God was in the death camp can still weep with the questioner; this weeping is not theological defeat but a profound form of witness. In both cases,

the willingness to remain present without answers constitutes authentic response to situations that exceed human comprehension.

The Hasidic master Nahman of Bratslav, himself no stranger to doubt and despair, taught that there is a form of faith that exists precisely in the place where ordinary faith has failed [30]. This *emunah she'b'tohu*—faith in the void—does not pretend to possess answers it lacks but trusts that meaning persists even when it cannot be grasped. This is not resignation but a deeper form of affirmation, a yes to existence that does not depend on comprehension.

Conclusion: The Wisdom of Not-Knowing
This article has argued that uncertainty and doubt, far from being deficiencies to be minimized, constitute essential features of authentic engagement with both medicine and religion. The recognition of uncertainty generates humility, the cardinal virtue for practitioners in both domains. It creates space for genuine encounter with patients and the sacred, space that is closed off by premature certainty. It opens practitioners to ongoing learning and growth, preventing the stagnation that accompanies confident mastery. And it honors the reality being addressed—bodies and psyches that exceed our categories, divine mystery that transcends our concepts.

The convergent structures of medical and religious epistemology suggest that both domains might learn from each other. Medicine might recover wisdom traditions that have been marginalized by scientific reductionism—awareness that healing involves more than technical intervention, that the healer's presence matters as much as the healer's prescriptions. Religion might incorporate epistemic humility that has sometimes been marginalized by doctrinal rigidity—awareness that all human formulations of the sacred remain partial and provisional.

Nicholas of Cusa, with whom we began, understood that learned ignorance is not the end of inquiry but its proper beginning. To recognize how much we do not know is to be opened to wonder, to be available for surprise, to remain students even as we serve as teachers. The physician who has learned ignorance approaches each patient with fresh attention rather than routine categorization. The theologian who has learned ignorance approaches sacred texts with renewed receptivity rather than predetermined conclusions.

In an age of information overload and confident pronouncements, the courage to not-know may be the rarest and most needed wisdom. This is not anti-intellectualism or obscurantism but the highest form of intellectual integrity—the recognition that reality exceeds our grasp, that truth remains larger than our formulations, that we walk always at the edge of an unknown that calls forth humility, wonder, and gratitude. Both the clinician and the theologian, standing at this edge, can find in their not-knowing not despair but vocation, not failure but invitation to the endless adventure of understanding that is never complete but always deepening.

Addendum: Doubt and Divine Presence in the Me'or Eynayim
The preceding argument finds remarkable confirmation in the

teachings of Rabbi Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl (1730–1797), whose *Me'or Eynayim* (Light of the Eyes) represents one of early Hasidism's most sophisticated treatments of spiritual crisis and the phenomenology of doubt. As Arthur Green has demonstrated in his groundbreaking scholarship on Hasidic spirituality, the Chernobyler's homilies reveal a master who understood that genuine religious life must encompass—not merely tolerate but actively integrate—experiences of divine absence, spiritual darkness, and radical uncertainty [31].

The *Me'or Eynayim* develops a distinctive theology of *katnut* (smallness or constriction) that treats periods of spiritual diminishment not as failures to be lamented but as necessary rhythms within authentic religious life. Green emphasizes how Menachem Nahum drew upon the Lurianic concept of cosmic contraction to understand the individual soul's experience of divine hiddenness [32]. Just as *tzimtzum* at the cosmic level created space for creation, so too *katnut* at the personal level creates space for spiritual growth that would be impossible in a state of constant illumination. The practitioner who knows only *gadlut* (expanded consciousness) has not yet encountered the depths of religious life.

Central to the Chernobyler's teaching is the radical claim that God is present precisely within the experience of absence. Green notes how Menachem Nahum repeatedly interprets biblical narratives of divine hiddenness—the binding of Isaac, the exile, the destruction of the Temple—as occasions when the *Shekhinah* descends into the lowest realms to accompany Israel in its darkness [33]. This is not absence disguised as presence but genuine absence that paradoxically constitutes a mode of divine intimacy. The God who withdraws in order to create space for human freedom remains closer in that withdrawal than a God whose constant presence overwhelms creaturely independence. As the *Me'or Eynayim* teaches on Parashat Vayetze, 'Even in the place where one thinks God is not, there too is God' [34].

Green's analysis reveals how the *Me'or Eynayim* transforms the experience of doubt from spiritual catastrophe into spiritual opportunity. When the Hasid experiences what Menachem Nahum calls *histalkut ha-mohin*—the departure of expanded consciousness—the appropriate response is not panic or self-condemnation but patient trust that this descent prepares for deeper ascent [35]. The oscillation between *gadlut* and *katnut*, between clarity and confusion, between faith and doubt, constitutes the normal rhythm of spiritual life rather than evidence of failure. The master who has integrated both states is more reliable than one who knows only illumination.

The implications for religious epistemology are profound. If doubt is not merely tolerated but built into the structure of authentic spirituality, then the religious leader who projects unwavering certainty has not attained higher levels of faith but has instead truncated the full range of religious experience. Green observes that for Menachem Nahum, the *tzaddik*—the righteous leader—is distinguished not by freedom from doubt but by the capacity to maintain connection with the divine even in states of apparent

disconnection [36]. This connection persists at a level deeper than conscious experience, in what the Hasidic tradition calls the *nekudah penimit*—the innermost point of the soul that remains attached to its divine source even when surface consciousness experiences only darkness.

The *Me'or Eynayim*'s treatment of the fallen or 'strange' thoughts (*mahshavot zarot*) that arise during prayer further illuminates this dynamic. Rather than viewing intrusive doubts and distractions as enemies to be suppressed, Menachem Nahum taught that these very thoughts contain divine sparks requiring elevation [37]. Green emphasizes how this teaching represents a remarkable psychological insight: the doubt that arises unbidden during moments of intended devotion is not evidence of spiritual failure but raw material for transformation. The practitioner who can work with doubt rather than merely against it develops a more robust and integrated spirituality.

This Hasidic phenomenology of doubt has direct applications to the clinical setting that parallels the theological context. The physician who experiences uncertainty about diagnosis or treatment is not thereby failing the patient but is instead opened to dimensions of the clinical encounter that would be foreclosed by premature certainty. Just as the *Me'or Eynayim* teaches that *katnut* prepares for deeper *gadlut*, so too clinical uncertainty can prepare for deeper understanding of the patient's situation. The physician willing to dwell in not-knowing creates space for the patient's experience to emerge in its fullness, untruncated by diagnostic categories imposed too quickly.

Green's scholarship also illuminates how Menachem Nahum understood the relationship between individual doubt and communal faith. The *tzaddik* who has traversed the depths of spiritual darkness becomes capable of accompanying others through similar experiences, not by providing easy answers but by modeling survival and eventual transformation [38]. This parallels the clinical wisdom that the most helpful physicians are often those who have themselves experienced illness or loss—not because suffering confers automatic insight but because it can cultivate the humility and presence that patients most need. The Chernobyler's teaching suggests that religious leaders might similarly be formed by their encounters with doubt, emerging not with certainty restored but with a chastened faith capable of accompanying others through darkness.

The *Me'or Eynayim* further develops the concept of *yeridah le-tzorekh aliyah*—descent for the sake of ascent—as a structuring principle for understanding spiritual crisis [39]. Green notes how this teaching reframes the phenomenology of doubt: what appears as loss of faith may actually constitute necessary preparation for faith's deepening. The soul that has descended into the depths of questioning carries material from those depths that enriches its eventual ascent. Applied to clinical practice, this suggests that the physician's experience of diagnostic uncertainty, therapeutic failure, and the limits of medical knowledge—when integrated rather than denied—contributes to the development of mature

clinical judgment. The practitioner who has confronted medicine's limitations understands something essential about the healing relationship that the practitioner of seamless competence does not.

Perhaps most significantly for our purposes, the *Me'or Eynayim* teaches that the divine letters themselves—the building blocks of Torah and creation—undergo cycles of expansion and contraction, revelation and concealment [40]. This cosmic linguistic theology suggests that uncertainty is woven into the very fabric of reality, not merely a limitation of human cognition. If even the divine word withdraws and contracts, then human doubt participates in a cosmic rhythm rather than representing deviation from a norm of certainty. Green's interpretation emphasizes how this teaching sanctifies uncertainty: the human experience of not-knowing reflects and participates in the deepest structures of existence.

The synthesis that emerges from reading the *Me'or Eynayim* through Green's scholarship confirms and deepens the central argument of this article. Doubt is not the enemy of authentic practice—whether religious or medical—but its necessary companion. The practitioner who has never doubted has never truly engaged the depths of their discipline. The practitioner who has integrated doubt into their practice carries wisdom unavailable to those who have known only certainty. And the practitioner who can accompany others through periods of doubt and uncertainty—whether patients confronting illness or seekers confronting spiritual darkness—offers a quality of presence more valuable than any quantity of answers.

Menachem Nahum of Chernobyl died in 1797, long before the developments in philosophy of medicine and cognitive psychology that have made uncertainty a respectable topic in clinical discourse. Yet his teachings, as recovered and interpreted by Arthur Green, speak directly to our contemporary situation. The physician struggling with diagnostic uncertainty, the patient confronting a frightening prognosis, the religious seeker whose faith has grown dark—all can find in the *Me'or Eynayim* a tradition that honors their experience rather than dismissing it, that treats their doubt as a pathway rather than an obstacle, that illuminates the darkness rather than pretending it does not exist.

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